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“Keep Great Company” Sermon Series: “Good to Great for God’s Glory”

Sunday, May 18, 2008©

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Scripture Lesson: *Acts 2:42-47*

It takes great relationships to have a great faith.

Let us pray. Lord God we praise you and thank you that your Son died on the cross so that we may have a relationship with you. We praise and thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit. Fill us with your Spirit this morning so that we may know you more fully and be transformed in our daily lives. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

You may have seen the story in the news last week that Rochelle High School in Central Texas won the Girls Texas State 1A track title. That’s not much of a story until you stop to consider that Rochelle High School only had one track team member, a high school junior named Bonnie Richardson.

Over two days time Bonnie won the high jump, placed second in the long jump, was third in the discus, won the 200 meter dash, and finished a close second in the 100 meter dash. By herself Bonnie scored 42 points for Rochelle High School. The next closest team, Chilton High School, scored 36.¹

Imagine what Bonnie will do her Senior year!

Some of us approach our relationship with Christ thinking we are the Bonnie Richardson of faith, a one-person team, that we can win the gold medal or at least get ahead all by ourselves. But that is not the way God has designed our faith. We get closer to God by getting closer to other people. Faith is not

learned as much as it is caught. If we have a good faith and want to have a great faith we will keep great company.

We talked last week how Peter on Pentecost preached what most people believe to be the greatest sermon in the history of the Church.

How do you follow up on the world’s greatest sermon? Do you upload it to YouTube? Do you market the DVD’s with a curriculum? Do you go to Disneyworld? No, you form the world’s greatest fellowship. Great preaching is not enough. We have to have great relationships to have a great faith.

In Acts 2 we are told that the young Church did a lot of things together. They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to eating together, to prayers. They sold all their possessions and lived together sharing everything they had. They went to temple together. They were like peas and carrots, Ben & Jerry, Heckle and Jeckle, —simply inseparable. And there may have been no time when the Church was stronger. Day by day, Acts tells us, God increased their number.

I think its worth asking why God set up our faith like this? Wouldn’t it be easier and much more efficient if we could just grow closer to God on our own? Why involve other people? Anytime you have to involve people it just gets messy. You do know that people are the number one cause of problems in the world!

I have a really great idea that I have pitched to God a few times. What if we could simply plug into something and just download our faith all by ourselves? It could be just like sitting in front of the TV or surfing the internet. Lets just cut out the middleman and go straight to Him—kind of like shopping at the outlet mall. God has said, “I’ll think about it.”

This God we worship is big on deep, personal, intimate relationships. And I think that is because relationships are a part of God Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God in three persons, blessed Trinity. We will sing that in just a few minutes. In *John 17* Jesus described His relationship with God the Father, saying that “*I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*” In *John 10:30* Jesus said, “*The Father and I are one.*”

Jesus Christ lived and died and was resurrected and ascended, so that you can have that kind of relationship. First, He died so that we might be one with Him, one with the God of the cosmos, the God who with a Word created everything we see and everything we are. Second, Christ live and died, and was resurrected and ascended so that we might be one with other people—be one with no fear of rejection, teams with no guilt, with nothing to hide. *Psalms 133:1*, “*How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity.*” It’s good for sisters too!

It takes great relationships to have a great faith.

Let me illustrate this. It’s barbecue season and I love to barbecue. But I’m a purist. I don’t use gas grills. I just don’t believe in them. It’s a religious thing. If I was cooking on a grill was a religion, I would be a charcoal-yterian.

The hardest part, I think, about cooking with charcoal is getting the fire going. If you take just one briquette and try to light it, it won’t work. You can’t even barbecue a shrimp with one briquette. You need several to do any good. But for those several to light you need them in close proximity. So, you stack them up. You get them as close together as you can. And then you don’t even need lighter fluid. You just need some newspaper and a match.²

Great churches work in the same way. They do everything they can to get people into relationships with each other, to get people in close proximity to one another—but rather than feed the fire with a newspaper and a match, we use the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. This is why we are working on creating more small groups here at PCOS, like Crown Ministries. This is why we are retooling some areas of our building to create places for people to just sit and talk. It takes great relationships to have a great faith.

A young man grew up wealthy and powerful, blessed with amazing talent. At the age of nine, his father died and his mother sent him to live with relatives. He grew up in the Church but when he attended college he lived a life devoted to pleasure and self-gratification. At the age of 21, by the virtue of his immense talent for public speaking and his wealth, he was elected to public office. He dedicated himself to nothing but a life a leisure and gaining power.

The years passed and he invited a childhood friend to vacation with him, his mother and sister on the French Riviera. What this man did not know was that this friend was a dedicated Christian. The young, talented, rich and powerful politician had planned the vacation to relax. But God’s plan was to redeem. The two men talked about Christianity for hours on end. And when the young politician saw a book entitled *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*,³ lying in the home where they were staying, his childhood friend suggested they read it together. Six months later the two men went on vacation again and the young politician began a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The first relationship we must have is with Jesus Christ. If we do not know Him, if we have not made room for Him in our heart, if we have not yet asked Him to be our Lord and Savior and accepted His grace and love for our lives, all our relationships will suffer. If the Church for me is about only worship or music or committees or coffee or my kids and not about Christ, then Jesus is probably a passing acquaintance rather than a personal Savior, a giver of rules rather than the author of life. And we remain far from the person whom God intended us to be. Everything I do of any value in this world, every true

joy, will emerge from the overflow of my intimacy with God. A relationship with Jesus is where we must begin.

But what kinds of other friendships do we need? Another book which we are using in this sermon series is by Chip Ingram called *Good to Great in God's Eyes*. Chip Ingram talks about three kinds of friendships which are important to our lives.⁴

*Prof once said something I'll never forget:
"Chip, everyone needs a Paul, a Timothy, and a Barnabas in their life—a Paul to learn from as a mentor and role model, a Timothy to sow seeds into the next generation with teaching and encouragement, and a Barnabas you can be totally open with, an encouraging friend who will go through life with you in the good times and in the sweat and heartache. That will keep you balanced."*

I want to talk about these three kinds of relationships in light of the Scripture passage we looked at today. Acts says that the early Church shared from what God had given them, giving to any who had need. I would like to talk about these three relationships saying what each of them have to share.

The Paul Chip Ingram talks about is the Apostle Paul who was a mentor to many people. Pauls share their love of Christ. We all need a Paul in our life, hopefully several, to show us God. Even pastors have Pauls. I have had a few. Betty and Bobby are two wonderful women from the church I served in Dayton who taught me so much about God. At that Church I taught a theology class during Sunday School and one day the subject was the Holy Spirit and I simply did not have very much to say. Betty was in the class and she asked a lot of questions, questions for which I did not have very good answers. This started a relationship where these ladies taught their pastor about an aspect of God in which I simply woefully ignorant, to which I had given intellectual assent, but not my heart. Betty and Bobby prayed with me. They gave me frank feedback on my sermons. They gave me books to read. They walked beside my family and me in every way and they did it with grace, gentility, and kindheartedness. It was one of the greatest gifts they

could give their pastor. I am a better pastor for you because Betty and Bobby were Pauls for me.

One day Betty came to my office. I could tell immediately that something was not right. She began by saying that this was one of the hardest things she ever had to do. But God had told her clearly to do it. She needed to hold me accountable for something our Church had done, something in which I had played a major role. For this event, we had been celebrated by the media. Local leaders had come to our Church. I had appeared on TV and in the newspapers. We had received congratulations all around. But as Betty spoke, I knew her words were true. Something had not felt right to me about what we had done, but I couldn't put it into words. She did in love. It remains one of the most loving things anyone has ever done for me. If you want to find a Paul, look for someone willing to share their love for Christ.

The Timothy Chip Ingram talks about was young man who was discipled by Paul, taken under his wing and taught the faith. Timothys share their need for Christ. Now that may not sound like a great thing to share. Some people spend a lifetime sharing what they don't have. But Timothys share their need hoping to fill it. I have been a Timothy for many people. I have had some Timothys in my life too. In college I had a fraternity brother who was a new Christian. His name is Scott. Scott had a hard time keeping his faith intact. Temptation always seemed to be crouching at the door. Scott and I got together every so often to talk and share. And I watched out for him at parties and tried to let him know whenever I saw him cross a line. Today Scott is a pastor in Michigan.

What's important here is that I wasn't a person of any great faith. I had my struggles too. I was, and I remain, far from perfect. But that didn't stop me from being an imperfect Paul for an imperfect Timothy. You may say, "I am in no way qualified to be a Paul for any Timothy." Qualified has nothing to do with it. The question is "Are you called?" God does not call without qualifying and He does qualify without calling. All of us can see a need for a Paul. Who doesn't need mentoring? Who doesn't need

discipling? But as much as we need Pauls we may need Timothy's even more. Timothy's keep us humble. They keep us selfless. They keep us striving. They keep us close to God. If you want to find a Timothy, look for someone who needs Christ.

The Barnabas Chip Ingram talks about was a friend of Paul's, a partner in ministry with whom Paul had a close and honest friendship. A Barnabas shares his life in Christ. A Barnabas is a peer, close friend with whom we can be totally and absolutely transparent, someone who will always speak the truth in love. A Barnabas in my life is Peter Larson. Just about a year ago, some of you will remember, Peter preached for my installation service. He is the Pastor at the Lebanon Presbyterian Church in Lebanon, Ohio. Peter and I share a lot about our lives, our families and our ministries. We are free to share our frustrations, our triumphs and joys. Just a few weeks ago, I called Peter about something with which I was struggling. I called him because I knew he would be honest with me, that he would, in love, give me the straight story and hold in the strictest confidence anything we discussed. And I would do the same for him. If you want a Barnabas, look for someone willing to share their life in Christ.

We never know how God will use our relationships to do great things. That young politician, after meeting Jesus Christ, went on to live a new life. He immediately began praying and reading the Bible for hours a day. He gave most of his income to the poor, and the church, in fact many years he gave away more than he earned. His political career, once devoted solely to his own advancement, became one of a tireless champion for those without a voice. In December of 1787, William Wilberforce stood on the floor of the British House of Commons and

announced his intentions to end the slave trade. In 1787 it was a ridiculous notion. But for the next 20 years William Wilberforce did not tire, relent, or relinquish. On February 24, 1807 at 4:00 a.m. the British House of Commons voted to make illegal the trade of human beings. However, the ownership of slaves remained legal in Great Britain and her colonies. Wilberforce dedicated the next 26 years of his life to the abolition of slavery in its entirety. Three hours before he died, in July of 1833, slavery was made illegal in the British colonies. William Wilberforce changed the world in a great way but only after a great relationship changed him.

None of us is a one person team. It takes great relationships to make a great change and it takes a great change to have a great faith.

1 Associated Press, "Richardson Wins State Team Title Alone," May 12, 2008.

2 *At this point in the sermon, I pulled out a "chimney" filled with charcoal briquettes, stuffed some newspaper into the bottom, and lit a match. I didn't light the chimney itself—much to everyone's relief!*

3 This is a book by Phillip Doddridge which made a splash in the late 1700's—sort of an early *Purpose-Driven Live*.

4 Chip Ingram, *Good to Great in God's Eyes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007) p.66.*